

One Man, One Vote; Tom Daschle Isn't Up for Reelection, but He Could Still Lose Big Tomorrow

November 4th, 2002

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The Washington Post

Tom Daschle makes a small entrance. He arrives commotion-free, a few minutes early for a campaign rally for Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) at the University of Iowa's Memorial Union. As he waits for Harkin, Daschle doesn't so much work the room as mill through it, gently, shaking hands and telling everyone how "terrific it is to be in Iowa" in a deep voice that's barely audible.

Daschle comes with no discernible swagger, no extra noise and no entourage other than three security guards who provide the only clue that he is a pivotal figure and popular target. Daschle started getting threats on his life several years ago. They began well before he became the Senate majority leader, well before opponents started comparing him to Saddam Hussein and well before someone sent anthrax to his office. Friends say that Daschle rarely speaks about the threats except to say that he tries to forget them, that he endures them with the same apparent nonchalance that he brings to what might be the toughest political job outside of the Oval Office.

No one besides George W. Bush has stood so prominently -- and precariously -- in the middle of so many recent Washington news cycles as Tom Daschle. He is a political figure wholly ensconced in this American moment, someone who always seems to be standing on the brink of, or in the aftermath of, something monumental. Daschle, 54, has just come to Iowa from Minnesota, where he had spent the weekend comforting the family and staff of Sen. Paul Wellstone, who died in a plane crash the previous Friday. He is just a few days from the election that will determine whether he keeps his job as majority leader. Nearly everyone in this Democratic crowd admires Daschle -- although few seem to realize that he's even here, in a smallish ballroom that holds about 120 people.

"He is?" says Holly Berkowitz of Iowa City, when informed of Daschle's arrival. She is, at this moment, just four feet from where the South Dakota Democrat has been standing for several seconds.

Daschle sleeps five hours a night but has a knack for looking well rested. He has sharp and lively blue eyes and a morning-fresh pompadour of excellent brown hair. When standing stationary, Daschle evinces a nervous energy by tiptoeing his lean runner's body up and down in quick bounces. "Hi, Tom Daschle," he says here shaking the hand of a voter who of course knows who he is.

A few minutes later, an antiwar protester confronts Daschle. The protester is holding a "Regime

Change Begins at Home" sign and is questioning Daschle about his support for the prospective war in Iraq. Daschle trots out the standard deflective rhetoric that politicians use in these situations: He tells the protester, Jimmy Moore of Fairfield, Iowa, that he respects his right to speak out, that dissent is the American way and that he really admires him for taking a stand.

Daschle's face is frozen in a slight and joyless grin as he turns in search of a friendlier audience. This turns out to be Harkin, who has just barreled in to loud applause. "Hey, leader," Harkin yells, and he envelops Daschle in a bear hug as Daschle buries his head in Harkin's torso.

Other than a brief conversation prior to the Iowa City rally, Daschle declined to sit for a formal interview for this article, saying -- through a spokeswoman -- that until Election Day, everything he does will be focused on keeping his party's majority in the Senate. After that, there will be plenty of time to talk, plenty of time to look back, take four-mile jogs through his Northwest Washington neighborhood and solitary drives across the 66 counties of South Dakota (as he does every summer). Things might even get calm enough for Daschle to contemplate other matters -- such as whether he'll run for president in 2004.

In fact, time has not slowed for Tom Daschle in more than a year. His life has been a speeding political treadmill since May 2001 when Jim Jeffords quit the Republican Party and Daschle took over as the Senate majority leader by one vote. After Sept. 11, 2001, he became the Democrat's main face of bipartisanship; the next month, when 20 members of his staff were exposed to anthrax, "Tom became a national victim," says Sen. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.).

Since then, Daschle has shot past Ted Kennedy and Hillary Clinton as the Republican Party's chief demon on numerous issues -- economic stimulus, judicial appointments and homeland security, among others. He has been called an "obstructionist," "empty-headed," "unpatriotic" and worse. The invective has only mounted during this election season and Daschle's name is reliably invoked at Republican campaign events -- and just as reliably it's been booed.

"I'm going to make it a little personal," Minority Leader Trent Lott said at a recent rally in Arkansas for Republican Senate candidate Tim Hutchinson. Lott (R-Miss.) promised that Arkansas would fare much better with Hutchinson in the Senate and with Lott as majority leader, not "Tom Daschle from North Dakota." Booooo.

One conservative group is running ads in four states that portray Daschle as a bobble-head doll -- standing next to Clinton and Kennedy bobble-head dolls. The Daschle doll shakes its head no as a narrator reads White House proposals on homeland security and "job-creating tax cuts." Bush has made several trips to South Dakota. He does not mention Daschle by name, but it's clear that the majority leader, like Bush, is as central a candidate as there is in this election, even if his name will appear on no ballots tomorrow. At rallies, Republicans dutifully deride the opposition as the "Daschle Democrats." Booooo.

At various times, Daschle has enjoyed good working relationships with both Lott and Bush, but

those relationships have deteriorated, according to sources close to all parties involved. (Neither Lott nor any White House official would return calls seeking comment for this article). When Daschle is asked, in Iowa City, whether the president has one of those cutesy Bush nicknames for him, he replies, "No, no," and does a smiling grimace as he shakes his head. "Although I'm sure he's got a lot of nicknames for me when I'm not around."

Daschle enjoys the role of Democratic boogeyman. "He sees it as a sort of badge of honor," says Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), whom Daschle defeated by one vote to become minority leader in 1994. "If he weren't effective, no one would bother going after him."

Despite the pelting Daschle has received, his negative ratings remain relatively low. Only 26 percent of respondents said they viewed him unfavorably in a Gallup Poll conducted in September. The attacks on Daschle "probably gets the Republican base excited," says former Senate majority leader George Mitchell (D-Maine), "but I don't know if they're convincing to anyone else."

Daschle cuts a strikingly unembattled figure, which is not to say he is insensitive to criticism. Indeed, he is far more so than his unflappable demeanor would suggest, friends and adversaries say. He rarely raises his voice, but will frequently lower it in stern anger. He follows what is said and written about him as closely as any senator does, perhaps more. "He is not a softy, but he is a sensitive person," says Larry Piersol, a federal judge in South Dakota and a close friend of Daschle's. Some Republican Senate staff members have coined the term "Tommy burns" to describe Daschle's quiet simmerings of temper.

Daschle's publicly stoic air masks a formidable cache of political ambition. This drive was displayed notably in 1994 when, in just his second term, he ran to replace the retiring Mitchell as his party's leader in the Senate. Daschle was a long shot to Jim Sasser of Tennessee, but Sasser lost his election to Bill Frist and then Daschle went on to defeat Dodd, 24-23. It was one in a series of tight victories that have marked Daschle's career from the time he won election to Congress in 1978 -- by 139 votes.

He is skilled at finessing delicate situations, especially his one-vote majority in the Senate. He has repeatedly thwarted the White House's plans by keeping a caucus of titanic egos together despite varied agendas and a tiny margin of error.

Daschle is self-deprecating but works hard at likability. Aides say he is obsessive when it comes to making the well-placed sympathy or congratulatory call, and after a political trip, Daschle will, more often than not, finish all of his handwritten thank-you notes (to his driver, to his hosts) before his plane has touched down.

Again, this hardly makes Daschle unique among good politicians. But beyond the mechanics of political affability, Daschle has intangibles.

"There are not a lot of people in politics who really understand friendships like Tommy does," says Tony Coelho, the former House Democratic whip who served with Daschle in Congress. He possesses "this fascinating ability to appear genuine at all times," Coelho says. This gives

Daschle the benefit of the doubt in many situations, Coelho says, just as his quiet style makes it easy for adversaries to underestimate him.

Bill Clinton was famous for his large FOB network, Coelho points out. Clinton would make unexpected phone calls and engage in late-night conversations. "But if you were in trouble, you would never think of calling Bill Clinton," Coelho says. "You knew it was a political relationship with Clinton. With Daschle, there's a feeling that it's a real friendship."

Like many U.S. senators, Daschle is also sufficiently ambitious to believe he can be president. He said he will decide sometime after Election Day. One wonders, however, how well the understated savvy that has served Daschle as majority leader would translate to a presidential run.

Daschle is the consummate double-take pol: You see him, you look again, and then it registers -- oh, it's him. He is 5 feet 8 -- much shorter than he appears on television. He is a solidly comfortable presence when he's in front of you, or on television, "someone you find yourself nodding along to," says Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), who is campaigning for a Democratic House candidate in Iowa City.

But Daschle is less compelling when he tries to elevate that presence on a podium. This is revealed in Iowa City, when he follows a fiery speech by Harkin.

Daschle begins in a slight and conversational voice. He is self-effacing -- saying that Wellstone was one of the few senators shorter than him, that the main reason he's campaigning for Harkin is that Harkin supported him for majority leader.

All you need to know about politics, Daschle says, you learn while driving a car. "You wanna go forward, what do you do? You put it in D," he says. "You want to go back, you put it in R." Everyone laughs, and some applaud and that would seem a tidy enough ending, except that here it gets slightly weird.

Daschle starts yelling, seemingly trying to match Harkin. He is at his most unnatural when yelling. "You got the drivers right here," he says. "You got the designated drivers right here."

Daschle's voice carries awkwardly, it cracks and his words come in a series of muffled barklike sounds. He bounces up and down, hugging and high-fiving local candidates and yelling something that's lost in the crowd's cheers.

Afterward, a small group walks to the front of the room to get his autograph. But by the time they get there, Daschle is outside in a waiting Ford SUV, gone as quietly as he had arrived.